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ABSTRACT

Although academics in Germany are engaged in extensive theoretical discussions over individualism ("liberalism") and communitarianism, this paper argues that the modern question of "individual freedom versus the community" is not currently an explicit component of the German civic education curriculum. Because of the difficult and vague nature of German academic theory, potentially valuable and relevant theoretical discussions often do not affect education practitioners. A classroom teacher's perspective is formed first not by theory but rather by the expressed interests of students and the topical conflicts in society as mirrored in the media; the teacher's field of interest, educational background, and teacher training; and the availability of applicable teaching materials. The treatment of the "liberal freedom versus the community" concept in various teacher materials including German civic education curricula, textbooks, magazines, "brochures," and teaching units is evaluated. The concept's relevancy to high school civic education is demonstrated and examples of questions to apply in the civics classroom are provided. (Contains 17 references.) (CB)

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Tensions Between Individualism and Community in Educational Settings Today: Choices and Prospects - A Classroom Perspective

by Wolfgang Boge

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Wolfgang Böge

Tensions between Individualism and Community in educational Settings Today: Choices and Prospects - A Classroom Perspective

Tagung "Individualism and Community in a Democratic Society" der Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 6. - 11. Oktober 1996 in Washington D.C.

The importance of the topic

The first thesis is that the topical discussion among liberals and communitarians has had no notable let alone strong new response in highschool teaching in Germany. The discussion has been very academic so far and is only starting 1. The facet of "the common good versus liberal individualism" in a general sense has always been a question in German political education, though.

One has to emphasize also, even if it seems to be quite a fashionable topic2., that the discussion might not be so ardent in Germany: The subject catalogue of the University of the Armed Forces in Hamburg for instance refers only to two titles 3. under the headword "Kommunitarismus" in 1995 and there are only six titles for the period 1992 - 1996. Only very recent handbook editions list the keyword "Kommunitarismus" in the index, but still without an independent article 4.

Science and classroom

The classroom perspective is quite often very different from the abstract discussions of theory. Unfortunately in Germany there is a distinct rift between theory and classroom in political science, because in our academic tradition theory has to be difficult to understand, abstract and nebulous the more the better as proof of advanced scholarliness. Especially the combination of both, educational and political theory, has often been blamed for such arrogance, as just Stefan Hradil, the Head of the German Association for Sociology , has just done again 5.

There is an apparent lack of bridging that would make theory easy to adapt to daily teaching.

So the starting point of a classroom teacher's perspective is not a given topical theoretical discussion, necessary as it might be regarded by theorists, but the expressed interests of his students and topical conflicts in society as mirrored in the media, his own field of interest, his own education, his teacher training, and especially the availability of correct, adaptable, applicable teaching materials.

The result of this rift between academic discussion and practitioners is that the first is enclosed in an

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ivory-tower and the latter often respond by not taking notice, even though the discussions of theoretical questions might be important and valuable.

So the second conclusion is that academic discussions often do not affect practitioners very much.

Let us take a given teacher who wants to approach the topic of Liberalism and Communitarianism. And let us follow his thoughts:

The basic educational setting?

The 16 German states each have cultural autonomy, that is they have their own curricula, which are roughly similar, though. There is no comparative study of the topics taught in the various different subjects related to social science. It is therefore impossible to give even a rough overview of the themes laid down the civics curricula in Germany at the moment.

In the state of Hamburg, for instance there are at least half a dozen different subjects and grades where the question of "individual freedom versus the community" can appear. The topic could be taught in Ethics grade 9 or Ethics grade 10, Civics (Sozialkunde) grade 10, Civics (Gemeinschafts-kunde) grade 11 or Civics (Gemeinschaftskunde) grade 12 and Civics (Gemeinschaftskunde) grade 13. Apart from that you have special curricula for each kind of secondaryschool e.g. Gymnasium, Gesamtschule, Realschule, Hauptschule, Berufsschule and so on. In neither case is it an explicit must as far as I can see.

How will classroom teachers respond to this situation?

Normally teachers will work through four steps:

1. She or he will look into his or her special state curriculum,
2. She or he will sift through the available textbooks .
3. She or he will examine the available teaching material in booklets and broschures and then will
4. use the freedom, teachers have in Germany, and will compile and combine a sequence of copied sources and texts enriched by articles from newspapers and magazines to develop his or her own teaching unit.

Curricula

In Germany curricula today are often relatively abstract and not always of direct help for concrete teaching, but rather guidelines containing basic principles, the concepts and overall topics. Apart

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from that their compulsary nature in detail is not very strong. So within the democratic spectrum they leave considerable freedom for teachers themselves to decide about the main focus and the sequence of steps.

"Liberal freedom versus the community" is not an explicit central category of either curricula or textbooks, but in nearly all topics it is an included aspect. So I looked for teaching units that might include the basic questions of the controvercy 6. In a 10th grade (15-16 year olds) curriculum from southern Germany from the 80s 7. the topic in question is directly addressed in a headline: "The Individual and the Community", a unit designed for 12 lessons. The content, though, is not specifically centered on our question. The students are to learn about the society around them, about the values of the family, the influence of the family and surrounding groups on the individual, about structures of groups and society. They are to acknowledge the rightful demands of society and how to pursue individual interests.

A grade 10 civics (Sozialkunde) curriculum from northern Germany 8. you find a 10 lesson unit "The formulation of political claims and objectives and the process of decisionmaking". The topic in question is not directly addressed but included. The student is to learn about individual participation, chances of individual rights, the function and working of political parties, the legitimacy of majority decisions in a parliamantary state and to judge the effects of laws and government policies on his own life.

The grade 13 curriculum Gemeinschaftskunde from northern Germany 9., 40 lessons, does not specifically mention our problem but allows room for individual arrangement. The students are to know the basic constitutional principles of the German Grundgesetz and the principles of legitimacy. They are to judge conflict solving structures and mechanisms of powercontrol und they are to evaluate the efficiency of the structures of society to solve present-day-problems. They are required to understand power, scope for action and control of political parties, the conflict of interests and their own responsibility for the community as a whole and the different concepts of democracy and different concepts of sovereignty. This may include the problem in question, but does not directly tackle it.

The latest curricula found, those from Schleswig-Holstein 1995/96 do not address the question at all 10. or include only a vague hint in one of the sub-chapters 11.

In curricular frameworks like these the teacher uses the guidelines as a basis for his concrete teaching about topical questions, problems, conflicts such as the new move towards a unsocial neo-

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capitalism, a society where the weakest go to the wall (Ellenbogengesellschaft), the problem of unimployment, the conflict between economy and ecology, the near bancrupcy of our social systems, problems of demography, problems of the obvious aullenness about politicians and political participation as threat to democracy itself and so on. In all these problems the question of individual responsibility and freedom, a just society and the obligation of a state to pursue certain policies even against individual rights are included . These basic questions have always been and will be asked regardless of the ups and downs of the theoretical debate. I may regard society today as more fragmented and may see a decline in personal responsibility and common consciousness, a change in the attitudes, fears and aspirations of the students, but at the classroom level I can see no big difference as far as the teaching is concerned between 20 years ago and today.

Textbooks

As curricular catalogues provide only a framework for classroom teaching teachers will often follow a hidden curriculum in textbooks. Let me give you some examples how these refer to the topic. The ethics textbooks which were examined do not address our question at all. You can find only some allusions in chapters about general problems like "justice", "solidarity", "participation" or "law as the universally binding fixation of norms" 12.

Textbooks for political education of 14-to-16-year olds mostly center around the specific interests of this age group e.g. school, family, leasure, drugsproblems, choosing a career, the draft, the world of media, voting. Furthermore they provide basic insight into local government, political institutions and processes. Neither of the most recent books analyzed for grade 7 - 11 addresses our question explicitly 13. Recent textbooks for grades 12 and 13 refer directly to the conflict between organized interest groups and the common good. Only in one of the textbooks is there a chapter on individual interests and the public good that could somewhat be used as basis for our question concerning liberal freedom and the community 14.

Magazines and brochures

So the normal attitude of a classroom teacher is to turn to the vast market of brochures and magazines made for use in education which are partly to be bought and partly distributed free by government institutions or interested organisations. And the teacher will select and copy and conceive his own teaching unit. Here at last we can make a find and more than one. An old issue of

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"Der Bürger im Staat", a publication of the Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg, of 1981, contains various articles about the question of "Too much Government?" 15. And a very recent issue of "PZ-Wir in Europa" 16 of June 1996, edited by the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, contains various examples of the community spirit, solidarity and self-help, a call for involvement, participation and responsibility, explaining Amitai Etzioni's ideas in one of its chapters. From sources like these 17 one would draw the texts and materials to prepare a suitable teaching unit.

An example from the classroom (Civics - grade 10)

1. Dimension of student's individual situation

In which way is each of us affected by the welfare system of the state?

Where do we rely on our own means, where do we rely on the community?

Where do we have freedom and choice, where are we not free and have to follow rules and obey laws?

Student's personal comment

How do I judge this loss of personal freedom due to the rules and laws?

What do we want for ourselves: more security or more freedom?

2. Constitutional and legal dimension

What are the present state's constitutional and legal obligations regarding the social system?

3. Historical dimension

What are basic opinions (sources) about social justice, about morality, about how we ought to act?

And how are these opinions rooted in our history?

How did people in former times cope with the problems?

Why has our system developed the way it has?

4. Dimension of German contemporary reality

What does the social net offer to residents of our country in detail today? What examples of the working of our welfare system do we find in everyday lives (Consider the public as well as the private sector?

5. The financial dimension

Who has to pay for all this through what channels and how much?

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6. The political dimension

Who can decide about changes? What is the decisionmaking process? What are the present policies of the German parties? . Who can decide about changes, how is it done? What is the present policy of the German parties?

7. Final conclusion

How do you judge advanteges and disadvantages of the present system?

How do you judge your partial loss of personal freedom?

Consider again: What do you want for yourself: more security or more freedom?

You can easily draw up more everyday teaching units like this one about for instance the question of abortion, our special Bavarian controvercy about putting up Christian crosses in classrooms, majority and minority rights and obligations in a society, the liberalisation of laws and the increase in crime, drugproblems or the use of nuclear power today and tomorrow. In all of them one aspect or the other of the controversy in question will play a vital role.: When does the demand of a majority for equality becomes oppression? When does protection of individual human rights turn into a tyranny of a minority? When does individual freedon turn into exploitative individualism? How much "pursuit of happiness" can we sustain if all risks and burdens are shifted to others or the society as a whole. How much emphasize shall we put on the rightful demands of the community and how much on the rightful freedom of the individual. And how can we enhance self-reponsibility, self-reliance and involvement in the end?

So the main conclusion is: even if the headlines do not address the questions directly, the topic is ever present in the practitioner`s daily teaching.

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